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ABSTRACT

This study examines economic and social stressors and their effects on the parenting styles and adolescent adjustment of African American families. It systematically characterizes and explains the nature of some of the chronic economic and social stressors experienced by poor African American families as they affect parenting and adolescent adjustment, and addresses the processes linking family stressors to adolescent adjustment. The stressors may include: (1) a high level of poverty; (2) low family income resulting from divorce, work cutbacks, or family illness; and (3) a high level of job uncertainly for various reasons. Research has indicated that economic hardship has a negative effect on psychological functioning and the quality of family relationships. The impact of living in stressful neighborhoods also causes psychological distress that results in less adequate parenting. Research on the linkage between African American parents' social networks and adolescent adjustment is scarce, but empirical studies have shown that adults and younger children benefit from the availability of an extended kin network and that social support from relatives enhances family functioning. Parenting style and family management practices may also be linked to adolescent adjustment. The processes that link stressful experiences to parental and adolescent adjustment need further exploration, as do the ways in which neighborhood characteristics affect family and adolescent adjustment. Normative data are needed to explain typical behavior patterns of poor and nonpoor African American families. Two related publications are listed for additional reading. (SLD)

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The Effects of Economic and Social Stressors on Parenting and Adolescent Adjustment of African American Families.

Principal Investigator: Ronald Taylor

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The National Center on Education in the Inner Cities

CEIC Research Brief

No. 109

The Effects of Economic and Social Stressors on Parenting and Adolescent Adjustment of African-American Families

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OVERVIEW

This study is primarily concerned with examining economic and social stressors and their effect on the parenting styles and adolescent adjustment of African-Americans families. Prior research has indicated that stressors in a variety of forms (i.e., financial strain, neighborhood crime, social isolation) are negatively associated with adolescent adjustment because of their adverse influence on parental well-being and parenting practices. Evidence suggests that parents are emotionally distressed by stressors and thus are more harsh and inconsistent in their relationships with their adolescent children. Adolescents, in turn, are more likely to engage in problem behaviors, to be dependent, and to be more depressed.

This study systematically characterizes and understands the nature of some of the chronic economic and social stressors experienced by poor African-American families; discusses the ways in which these stressors impact their parenting practices and adolescent functioning; and addresses the processes linking family stressors to adolescent adjustment. In addition, suggestions for related future research are made and implications for social policy design and implementation are examined.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

The economic stressors facing many African-American families today include: a high level of poverty; low family income resulting from divorce, work cutbacks, or family illness; and a high level of job uncertainty caused by low education levels, less job seniority, and the relocation of jobs from the central cities to suburban and outlying areas. Research has shown that, when African-American families suffer from these economic stressors, family income is associated with the quality of adolescent relations with peers, school performance, and self-confidence. Findings from a number of studies have also posited the linkage of economic strain with a variety of socioemotional problems in childhood and adolescence, including depression, conduct and psychological disorders, and social maladaptation.

Evidence suggests that economic hardship has a negative influence not only on psychological functioning, but also on the quality of family relationships. Research has also demonstrated the linkage of economic disadvantage with parental emotional distress, and has associated job loss and unemployment (from which African Americans suffer disproportionately) with a variety of psychological and emotional problems, including somatic complaints, neurosis, and suicide.

Other research has focused on the effects of families' economic prospects on parents' child-rearing practices, although the focus of this research has mainly been on white families. This research reveals that a scarcity of economic resources adversely affects parent-child relationport and increasing harsh parenting. It has also been suggested that financial stressors negatively affect parents' psychological distress which, in turn, is associated with less adequate parenting.

The impact of living in stressful neighborhoods also affects African-American parents and adolescents. Research consistently shows that living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of unemployment and poverty is linked to adolescent problem behaviors such as increased dropout and pregnancy rates. Findings from disadvantaged neighborhoods demonstrate that the more parents and adolescents perceive their neighborhood as run-down and unsafe, the more adolescents report lower levels of self-esteem and higher psychological distress, including depression and anxiety. In addition, stressful experiences have been linked to mental health problems, school adjustment difficulties, and psychological distress among African-American adolescents.

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There is a dearth of research linking neighborhood/community contexts with parental adjustment and parenting practices. The research that has been conducted indicates that families living in "cohesive" urban neighborhoods with extensive social and financial resources, shared values, and social trust among residents tend to use of a variety of agents in the community to facilitate youngsters' socialization. Parents' well-being and parenting practices are expected to be enhanced in the cohesive neighborhoods. In contrast, families living in "anomic" communities, where social and financial resources are impoverished and shared values and social trust are low, tend to restrict their adolescents' contact with others in the community.

Despite extensive literature arguing for the importance of kinship support as a culturally distinctive feature of family life, research on the linkage between African-American parents' social networks and adolescent adjustment is scarce. Empirical work shows that adults and younger children benefit from the availability of an extended kin network and that social support from kin enhances family functioning. In addition, kinship support is positively associated with adolescents' self-reliance and is negatively associated with problem behavior. Other research indicates that social support enhances individuals' opportunities for positive experiences, while diminishing the likelihood of negative ones.

Social support has also been linked to parents' child-rearing behaviors and parental practices associated with adolescent adjustment. Specifically, within the context of kinship social support, African-American parents are more accepting, monitor adolescent behavior more firmly, manage the home more effectively, and are more likely to be involved in adolescents' schooling.

In terms of linking styles and practices of parenting with indices of adolescent adjustment, research reveals that authoritative parenting, although not prevalant in African-American families, is linked with adolescent self-reliance, independence, and a lack of delinquent behavior. Harsh punishment, however, has been associated with adolescent depression and cognitive distress.

Parents' family management practices may also belinked to adolescent adjustment. Family organization (i.e., structuring and monitoring adolescents' time, activities, and schooling by establishing daily and weekly routines and schedules) and parental involvement in schooling (i.e., helping with schoolwork, and attending school functions) are significantly related to adolescent adjustment. These findings indicate that many of the parenting behaviors compromised by family stress (parental warmth, family organization, parental accessibility) are linked to adolescent well-being.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

• From a social policy standpoint, improving the financial well-being of disadvantaged African-American families is critically important; finding jobs and educational services in communities where businesses and industries have relocated will help to mollify this problem.

• Decreasing social isolation and building the social networks of poor African-American families is also important. Possible centers for building families' social networks include schools, churches, and community centers.

• Comprehensive interventions aimed at improving the conditions of poor families should address not only the financial state of a community, but also the need for social resources and supportive networks, and should examine ways of reducing neighborhood problems such as crime, high mortality rates, and poor health care.

• In terms of future research, the processes that link stressful experiences to parental and adolescent adjustment need further exploration. Future work needs to examine how factors such as age, gender, and/or temperament may influence parents' and adolescents' reactions to stressful experiences.

• More research is needed on the manner in which neighborhood characteristics affect family and adolescent adjustment. Future work should focus on identifying the key qualities of neighborhoods that influence family functioning.

• It is important to explore additional variables that may mediate the association of neighborhood factors with adjustment; for example, variables such as irritability, anger, fear, and helplessness are all possible reactions to neighborhood stressors that affect parents.

• Normative data on typical behavior patterns of poor and nonpoor African-American families are needed. Development of this data should eschew comparative approaches with preconceptions about appropriate patterns of behavior, focusing instead on approaches that examine the conditions and functioning of a single population.

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Related Publications

Taylor, R. D. (1994). Risk and resilience: Contextual influences on the development of African-American adolescents. In M.C. Wang and E.W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 119-130). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Taylor, R.D., & Wang, M.C. (Eds.) (In Press). *Social and Emotional Adjustment and Family Relations in Ethnic-Minority Families*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.